

In Just An Eight-Year Career, C R Subburaman Created Memorable Songs In Films Such As 'Laila Majnu' And 'Devadas'. Carnatic Singer MLV Called Him 'Emperor Of Musical Notes'

Vamanan

CR Subburaman (1924-1952) lived for only 28 years and worked as a music director and composer for just eight. Despite this short career, he left a lasting impression with his magnetic personality and musical prowess, enriching the world with memorable songs from films such as 'Laila Majnu' (1950), 'Manamagal' (1951), and 'Devadas' (1953).

M L Vasanthakumari (MLV), the latter-day Carnatic music diva, who made her bow as a playback singer under Subburaman's baton in the film 'Rajamukthi' in 1948, could declare that he was the 'emperor of musical notes' (Swara hakravarthi). M S Viswanathan and T K Ramamurthy, who were his assistants and whose historic musical partnership was forged to complete projects Subburaman left behind, would sing praises of his musical fecundity. Ilaiyaraaja, the gen-next of the duo, has said that Subburaman's 'Enadhu uyir, rugum nilai' in 'Laila Majnu', seeped into his soul and shaped his musical vision.

Hailing from a Telugu-speaking family that had moved generations ago from Krishna district in Andhra Pradesh to Chinthamani

THE MAN WHO INSPIRED ILAIYARAJA

village in Tirunelveli, Subburaman warmed up to music very early in life, and his father Ramaswami Iyer did more than notice this. Though he was mainly engaged in farming operations, he was attuned to Subburaman's interest in music and placed him under the tutelage of a nadaswaram vidwan in Kumbakonam.

Shankar, Subburaman's younger brother who later teamed up with Ganesh to score music in films, had heard from his father that Subburaman was an extraordinarily fast learner; he could master intricate varnams in a day. By 14, Subburaman was a consummate player of the harmonium. At 16, he joined the Gramophone Company's orchestra as a harmonium accompanist. When the Company's music director R N Chinniah fell ill after being booked for the Telugu film 'Chenchulakshmi' (1943), Subburaman stepped in. According to musical archivist V A K Ranga Rao, film producers learnt from



C R Subburaman

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the musical hit's singers that it was Subburaman who was responsible for its haunting melodies such as 'Kanipinchitva Narasimha' and 'Nijamadudana needana' and began to sign him for their films.

Subburaman scored the mu-

sic for the Tamil film 'Udayanan Vasavadatta' (1946), starring rising Carnatic music star G N Balasubramaniam, and Vasundhara Devi. The former is said to have marvelled at Subburaman's genius. But the film bombed and some critics panned its music too!

Subburaman shared credits with another music director, M S Gnanamani for the Tamil film 'Paithiyakkaaran' (1947) and scored the music for actress Bhanumathi's first production, 'Ratnamala' (1948), a Telugu film. Hits such as 'Anandadaayini' confirmed Bhanumathi's conviction that Subburaman was a musical genius.

At a time when production houses and studios believed that having two composers for a film would create a mood of competition and harvest better songs, Subburaman shared the music direction credits in films such as Jupiter Pictures 'Mohini' (1948) and 'Abhimanyu' (1948) with S M Subbaiah Naidu, with whom he seems to have shared a warm relationship.

Subburaman was the music director of 'Rajamukthi' (1948), Thyagaraja Bhagavathar's first film after his release from prison in the Lakshmikantham murder case. Subburaman introduced MLV as a playback singer for actress V N Janaki in the film. According to MLV, one of the factors that made her father, a conservative who thought that singing in films would wreck her classical singing, give the green signal was that a man of Subburaman's calibre in Carnatic music was calling the notes! Though the

much-hyped film failed, MLV's sweetly rounded tonality stood out in lovely songs in the Carnatic mould in the film starting her very eventful career as a playback singer in the 1950s.

In his reminiscences, poet and lyricist Kannadasan has recalled that his 'Sithira paavaiyamma' tuned by Subburaman and rendered by MLV for 'Kanniyin Kaadhali' (1949) was well received. In the C N Annadurai-scripted 'Velaiikkari' (1949), Subburaman's 'Oridam thanile' on the evils of wealth was a resounding hit because of its novelty of approach, catchy cadence and meaningful lyrics. But it was in the Telugu film 'Laila Majnu' (1950), that Subburaman simply bowled over the masses. Such was the massive success of the dolorous ditties of this tragic romance starring Bhanumathi and A Nageswara Rao that it led to its Tamil dubbed version triumphing over the straight Tamil version of 'Laila Majnu', starring T R Mahalingam and M V Rajamma, in theatres.

When Jupiter Pictures wanted to dub its successful MGR-starrer 'Marma Yogi' (1951) in Hindi as 'Ek Tha Raaja', it had Lata Mangeshkar sing a couple of songs under Subburaman's baton. These songs, 'Poori ho Gayi Man ki Baat' and 'Kar Le Shikaari Shikaar', have an appeal to this day. Again, Lata flew to Chennai to sing a couple of songs under Subburaman's direction for the Hindi version of Jupiter's bilingual, 'Rani'. She called Subburaman a master composer.

Challenged by his contemporary G Ramanathan to compose songs in the Carnatic idiom, Subburaman exerted himself into a tour de force in the genre through his 'Ellaam inba mayam' (for the film 'Manamagal'), rendered by MLV and P Leela with finesse after multiple rehearsals. GR had later told Subburaman that it was his way of getting the best out of him. The Bharati song, 'Chinnanchiru kiliye' from the same film set in a garland of ragas has become a favourite light piece in Carnatic music kutcheris.

It was in 'Devadas', made both in Tamil and Telugu, that Subburaman's all-round genius came out in songs like 'O Devadas', 'Ellaam maayai thaana' and 'Thunidhapin maname'. Sadly, the film was released after his premature death.

(The writer is a historian of Tamil cinema)

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ENDURING LEGACY

Between 1943 and 1952, Subburaman scored the music for about 35 films, sometimes sharing the music direction credit with other composers

Among Subburaman's songs in Tamil are 'Inbakkaviyam ragum vazhve' (Kaadhal), 'Naa konda kaadhal' (Kaadhal), and 'Iru Kaadhalar' (Manamagal)

Subburaman had been a partner in the production of 'Devadas', the film that brought him the greatest fame as a composer

Noted playback singer, P Leela, learnt Carnatic music from Subburaman

Subburaman's son (Latha) Lathaa also became a music director. His son Rashaanth Lathaa is following in his father's footsteps



CRS on harmonium composing for 'Bhanumathi'